



# **Firewater: How Alcohol Is Killing My People (and Yours)**

*Harold Johnson*

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## **Firewater: How Alcohol Is Killing My People (and Yours) Harold Johnson**

A passionate call to action, *Firewater* examines alcohol's history, the myths surrounding it, and its devastating impact on Indigenous people. Drawing on his years of experience as a Crown Prosecutor in Treaty 6 territory, Harold Johnson challenges readers to change the story we tell ourselves about the drink that goes by many names—booze, hooch, spirits, sauce, and the evocative "firewater." Confronting the harmful stereotype of the "lazy, drunken Indian," and rejecting medical, social and psychological explanations of the roots of alcoholism, Johnson cries out for solutions, not diagnoses, and shows how alcoholism continues to kill so many. Provocative, irreverent, and keenly aware of the power of stories, *Firewater* calls for people to make decisions about their communities and their lives on their own terms.

## **Firewater: How Alcohol Is Killing My People (and Yours) Details**

Date : Published October 7th 2016 by University of Regina Press

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Author : Harold Johnson

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## **From Reader Review Firewater: How Alcohol Is Killing My People (and Yours) for online ebook**

### **Kim O. says**

Firewater is very readable, relatable, and important. Johnson writes with such sincerity blending his human experience with research and always, always the anecdotes thread his 'stories' together. You see, Johnson believes that we each live out a story. One that we are born into and model, but also that we can adopt a different story, and have the potential to change our story, when conditions and support prevail. What an impact the final 3 stories in this book make – both sad and beautiful at the same time. All 3 provide a message for the future – a message for action & hope. I do hope you make the opportunity to read this book.

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### **Loretta says**

This was interesting. My rating doesn't really reflect what I think of as the importance of this - I think it is important, and I think many people, and frankly, especially white people, should read it. I have some disagreements and quibbles with some fairly over-generalized conclusions - in particular, for example "alcoholics aren't a big problem in society - they're too busy looking for their next drink. The problem is mostly binge drinkers". Well....there are some ways and contexts in which that might be true (first year university, for instance) - but mostly - no. That is a vast oversimplification.

Where this book really struck me is how it compared the way "society" views an aboriginal person drinking (lazy, criminal, alcoholic) vs a white person drinking (regular, routine, normal, what's wrong with wine at dinner? it's wine o'clock). It was a very interesting experience to be reading this at the same time I was listening to the audiobook of Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol. Through a different lens, Dowsett makes the same point that Johnson does: the way our society treats and markets alcohol as a social good masks a serious social problem - a problem that manifests in different ways (or that is perceived in different ways) depending on who's doing the drinking and who's doing the judging.

Both books were very thought provoking and worth reading.

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### **Bay says**

A must read.

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### **Mark says**

Solid, cohesive, and thought provoking. This is a real surprise of a book. Harold Johnson writes in a beautiful way that ties the entire book together. If you read one book this year about Alcohol Abuse, Canadian Law, Aboriginal Communities, or Folklore... it could be this book. Bonus if you've struggled with alcohol or know someone who does. This book really puts the experiences in perspective.

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## **George Ilsley says**

Excellent, timely and thought-provoking. Relevant to everyone who is concerned with lives steered and ruined by alcohol. Johnson's message is the "story" we are told or adopt, about alcohol and everything else. Keep this in mind the next time you watch a movie where alcohol is used for celebration or the next time you see a "news" story about a craft brewery or winery. We are constantly told drinking is an indispensable part of life. Johnson recommends people celebrate sobriety instead. People who are sober are really the silent majority.

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## **Ashleigh Mattern says**

Firewater is one of those rare books that changes the way you see the world. The book was not written for me; Harold Johnson prefaces the book stating that he wrote it for his people, the Woodland Cree of Treaty 6 territory. But I have a theory that the more specific your story, the more universal it becomes, and that seems to be the case with Firewater. Alcohol has wide-ranging effects in society, and the problems Johnson describe are evident in almost all communities, so no matter who you are, his words have impact. Plus, the author is incredibly wise, with insights and ideas that will open your mind to new ways of thinking. If your life has been affected by alcohol, you should read this book. And if you think your life hasn't been affected by alcohol, you should read this book. What you find here might surprise you.

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## **Suzy says**

This book is written by an Indigenous lawyer writer for Indigenous people. I am an Indigenous person who is from the same area Johnson is. I am also a lawyer. So I guess this book is for me but I often felt alienated from his vision. Johnson goes through various ways of thinking about the alcohol problem and presents the pros and cons. All concepts are presented as being "story". If we want to change the alcohol story, we need to make a new story. Johnson essentially makes the case for Indigenous people to choose alcohol abstinence and highlights two success stories of people who have made this choice.

Alcohol has directly affected both sides of my family in a negative way. I felt the book had some basic good advice for people to consider. Johnson encourages Indigenous people who live sober lives to be more vocal about their healthy life choices. He also presents to the reader why Indigenous should be looking for leaders who model a sober and healthy lives. Satisfaction with good leaders is mirrored in a better and healthier community.

As an Indigenous person who was deprived of my cultural traditions growing-up, some of Johnson's comments "rubbed" me the wrong way. For example, he presents traditional ideas on mourning, that grieving takes place intensely for a year and then you let go, lest the spirit of your loved become stuck on earth because you can't let go. I respect this tradition and belief. However I don't see much of myself here. I also think the tradition he envisions isn't that far off from Western Edwardian mourning traditions. I'm a city Indigenous vegetarian basically removed from cultural traditions. Yet, I'm still very much an Indigenous person and I matter. This book didn't make me feel like I am part of the stories he is telling, so I see this as a shortcoming since this book is supposed to be for me.

I feel Johnson over-simplifies some of his stories about addictions and Western (cousin's) traditions. For example, science has only ever been taught to me as being theory based. Johnson presents science as a definite story "cousin" says is presented as true, which hasn't been my experience at all. I would agree that Indigenous people have been treated as if their beliefs and traditions don't matter in the face of cousin's traditions however.

Johnson asks "do we drink because we're poor or are we poor because we drink?" I would say both things can happen at once and both things can be further twisted by pervasive inequality which is real and not just a separate "victim story". There are rich and successful non-Indigenous drunks who aren't stigmatized the same way Indigenous people are. The legal profession is notorious for alcoholism, which Johnson witnesses in this book. So it's somewhat simplistic to imply that we're poor because we drink, when many non-Indigenous are able to live rich and successful lives while being drunks and druggies concurrently.

To sum up, while this book was written by one of my own people for me, I wish I had seen more of myself in it. I think this book has some good advice but does tend to over-simplify, in my opinion. I wish there had been more statistics used and I wish footnotes had been included at the bottom of each page, instead of the back. I agree with him that Indigenous people who live sober lives should be louder about their success stories. I believe in the power of "story" but also that many stories can happen at once. Stories can overlap and bleed into one another and thus skipping over that part of the story, won't make it disappear.

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### **Karl says**

Perhaps this book deserves a higher rating than 3.5 that I am willing to give it. It is a quick read about the devastating impact alcohol has on indigenous people and how it continues to kill at an unthinkable high rate in their communities. The book is written in frank terms and plain english; but it falls short on facts supported by statistics.

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### **Rennie says**

Informative, insightful and inspiring. The book did an excellent job of explaining how the current situation came to be and how the outside perception of the Indian (Mr. Johnson's word) has become a self-fulfilling view causing them to lose sight of their strengths. And finally, it talked about the responsibility and ownership we all have to take on in terms of creating our own story and vision of the best we can be. We can't expect others to do it for us and if this message can be received by enough people things have to get better.

The Indian (Mr. Johnson's word) sense of community and respect for the land is something we could all learn from and perhaps leverage into an ability to change our collective story for a better future.

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### **Vontel says**

Well written, with a story-telling language level that can be understood by most, about a complex social issue, along with an excellent bibliography for more extensive searches. Although it is geared toward the Indigenous population, and especially the Treaty 6 group, Johnson's narrative and approach to solutions has

much to offer the non-indigenous population to reduce the considerable health, family and social costs which we all face as a country.

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### **John says**

Very interesting book... how alcohol consumption and alcohol abuse are figured in very culturally specific ways, and how the stories we tell ourselves about drinking, decorum, manners, and social status are all highly contingent on who we are, what communities we belong to, and what sorts of things are apparently, and literally at stake.

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### **Wanda says**

I commend the author, Harold Johnson for bringing forward the truth about alcohol, the history of it's introduction to Indigenous people in Canada and the long lasting damage it has created. His wisdom, experiences, and "his story", initiates further positive action and hope that there will be a future where alcohol is not at the heart of every tragedy. Through this action, Indigenous people can gain back their rightful claim to their traditions, culture and freedoms in a healthy and deserved manner without interference from alcohol. All Canadians would benefit from reading this insightful and meaningful book. Our entire society stands to benefit from bringing this issue to the front where it belongs. Placing this book in all high school curiculus would be an asset! 4/5 stars

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### **Taylor says**

I am lowering the stars for this book from a 4 > 3.

I love reading Canadian historical books, especially those from minority groups generally and Indigenous groups, specifically.

Harold Johnson's text is less a history lesson and more a treatise on the history of alcohol and indigenous peoples. He states that his book is written as a plea TO his indigenous brothers and sisters with the white cousins as an afterthought. Kind of like, "Hey, if they read it, it applies to them too, but this is for US."

I would have rated this book much higher if it were not for the lack of statistics and display of fact. Johnson EXPLAINS this, however; explains WHY he was unable to get hard numerical evidence: 1) it doesn't exist and 2) it doesn't exist because people are UNWILLING to create it for whatever reason. Additionally (my second argument "display of fact"), having come from an academic background, I find it very hard to be convinced by overly emotional language. Johnson's arguments are logical and sound, but too emotional for me, making it too painful and biased. I found myself thinking, "if there is a general reader who doesn't have the historical knowledge, personal or familial experience, then how would they feel about this text? They would disregard what is being said and argued for by using "the white story" (that Johnson alludes to) surrounding alcohol.

A text such as this is a revolutionary one in its subject matter. It may open up many more doors for research surrounding this subject. However, because of the lack of empirical evidence in this specific text it may not

be as successful in making **a large** impact.

(I also just have to say this too, so I am sorry: Next, if someone is a conspiracy nut--like me--alcohol is one that placates and mollifies the masses, which is why it is so abundant. A good example of this is actually within Johnson's text when he explains the traders using alcohol as a tool for influencing the trade with FN peoples. Without it, who knows where we would be, and how society would change. I wish I could express that reddit argument of Brave New World vs 1984... entirely relevant here.

<http://imgur.com/r/politics/vRBtL>)

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### **Mohawkgirl says**

An important read about how alcoholism is killing Indigenous peoples in Canada, however, I would say this affects every Indigenous nation dealing with alcohol in their own respective communities, everywhere. Alcohol is an insidious and toxic substance that although legal, advertised and celebrated, brings about the destruction of so many people and families, regardless of race, ethnicity, and culture. It is the silent killer that most people don't care to talk about nor admit has such a powerful hold on so many.

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### **Cheriee Weichel says**

Johnson claims that alcohol is destroying Indigenous people. He asks indigenous a non-indigenous readers to look closely at what stories they have around their use of alcohol. He focusses on the historical stories connecting indigenous people to alcohol abuse and calls for these stories to be changed.

He acknowledges that it isn't going to be easy, and that it will require substantial changes to economic reality to be successful. He asserts that leaders in the community must maintain sobriety. He claims that they must model different stories for youth to emulate.

This quote has stuck with me.

"The economy is a powerful story. We give human sacrifice to it. There are people in poor countries who must starve to death because the economy story says that even though we have too much food in this part of the world, if we gave any to them, we would destroy the economy. We used to believe in dragons and unicorns. Now we believe in market forces. The economy doesn't exist. It's something we made up, and we give it power."

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